Theory and Social Problems
What is a Theory?

“A theory is a system of interconnected abstractions or ideas that condenses and organizes knowledge about the social world. It is a compact way to think of the social world.”

-W. Lawrence Neuman, 2007

Basics of Social Research
Theory

Essentially, a theory is an explanation. A theory links concepts to help us understand a social phenomenon. For example, a theory might help us understand how a social problem develops, why certain behaviors become social problems, or what factors make an issue a bigger or smaller social problem.
Modeling Theory

Figure 1: Tinto’s (1975) Theoretical Model of College Withdrawal

SOCIOLOGY 403: SOCIAL PROBLEMS
Modeling Theory

Let’s see if we can develop a model that explains smoking.

We want to answer the question:

Why is it that people take up smoking?
Linear Model

\[ y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 x_1 + \beta_2 x_2 + \ldots + \beta_k x_k + \varepsilon_i \]

where:

\[ y = \text{dependent variable} \]
\[ x = \text{independent (predictor) variables} \]
\[ \beta = \text{regression coefficient} \]
\[ k = \text{total no. of independent variables} \]
\[ \varepsilon_i = \text{residual error term} \]
Modeling Theory

Let’s consider smoking as a social problem.

Let’s address a linear model addressing this question:

What factors affect whether a community will adopt a smoking ban?
Role of Theory in Understanding Society

From Charles C. Ragin, 1994
Constructing Social Research